

7-2013

Personal Reflection: Teaching in the Shadow of a Dead God

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Recommended Citation

Corrigan, Paul T. (2013) "**Personal Reflection:** Teaching in the Shadow of a Dead God," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 26.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2013.070226>

Personal Reflection: Teaching in the Shadow of a Dead God

Abstract

Excerpt: Potter (2013) argues that even though many college teachers have adopted constructivist practices and perspectives, the “foundations” of Western higher education remain objectivist through and through. In the title metaphor of his essay, “objectivism” is the dead god. Constructivism killed it conceptually. But materially and ideologically speaking, its shadow still hangs over everything we do. While we work to deeply engage learners in their own learning, the structures and infrastructures of our institutions assume a superficial understanding of learning and thereby undermine our efforts.

Keywords

Potter, Objectivism

Teaching in the Shadow of a Dead God

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Potter (2013) argues that even though many college teachers have adopted constructivist practices and perspectives, the “foundations” of Western higher education remain objectivist through and through. In the title metaphor of his essay, “objectivism” is the dead god. Constructivism killed it conceptually. But materially and ideologically speaking, its shadow still hangs over everything we do. While we work to deeply engage learners in their own learning, the structures and infrastructures of our institutions assume a superficial understanding of learning and thereby undermine our efforts.

With his central example, Potter joins those who critique the “credit hour” (e.g. Tagg, 2003) as the fundamental unit for organizing and certifying learning. The current objectivist system in higher education has students sit in classes so many hours per week, earn so many credits per semester, repeat this for four years, and receive a degree. As Potter sees it, constructivist approaches cannot simply be “added on” to this objectivist foundation because deep learning “takes more time” than such a foundation allows for. Students cannot succeed in five courses in one semester (a traditional “full course-load”) if all five courses are based on constructivist principles and practices, requiring in-depth reading, writing, revising, reflecting, etc. (p. 9). To be able to engage deeply in constructivist courses, students can only take a few courses at a time. But since that would mean falling behind schedule for graduating, students have little choice but to engage in such courses superficially or to simply avoid them (p. 7).

For Potter, the educational impact of constructivist teaching remains superficial because constructivist teaching conflicts with powerful overriding factors (such as the credit hour) that determine how students move through school and, consequently, how they learn or do not learn. Potter warns that “Unless we dispose of objectivism at its deepest levels, at the levels of foundation and structure and categories of understanding, constructivism and its allied methods cannot deliver on their considerable promises” (p. 9).

I found Potter’s analysis profound and its implications profoundly troubling. I’m left asking some difficult questions.

1. Does Potter describe contemporary higher education accurately?

It seems likely that he does. What he says matches what I’ve experienced at multiple universities, what I’ve heard from other teachers about the institutions they work in, and what several important studies have to say about the state of things in higher education (Tagg, 2003; Bok, 2003; Fink, 2003; Nathan, 2005; Weimer, 2013). Nonetheless, because Potter does not offer much empirical support for his description and because serious implications follow if he is right, I think that this question should still be asked. We may particularly want to interrogate whether constructivism and objectivism are as mutually

exclusive as he suggests and whether the latter is as pervasive and deeply embedded as he describes. Perhaps things aren't actually so bleak. Perhaps they are.

2. What can we do to bring about the depth and breadth of reform Potter calls for?

Everything that we have done so far, Potter argues, has been superficial in its effects. But we've done a whole lot already. We've changed the way we teach and the way we think about teaching and learning. We've created a scholarly discipline with conferences and journals. We've started several grassroots movements for reform. We've set up centers for teaching and learning. If our individual and collective efforts so far have not been sufficient, what should we do? What is the first practical step? What is the next step? I (2013) have argued that we need to get more college teachers reading the scholarship on teaching and learning for themselves. Potter (personal communication, January 16, 2013) followed up his article with the idea that we must change "the reward system used to motivate faculty priorities," which currently devalues teaching. But which would come first? How can we change the reward system without first having a critical mass of informed and motivated faculty to support such a change? And how can we get a critical mass of informed and motivated faculty without first changing the reward structure to privilege rather than devalue knowledge about teaching and learning? Perhaps grassroots activism is the way to go, getting faculty on board and informed little by little. But that approach cannot guarantee anything.

3. Can such reform even be accomplished?

Can we actually move out from the shadow of objectivism? If the obstacles are so great, objectives so difficult, and resources so paltry, what are our chances at fundamentally changing things for the better? Is it plausible? Can we realistically expect to rebuild the foundations of higher education in line with what we already know about teaching and learning? This question needs to be given some hard thought. And we need to consider the accounts of those like Sipress and Volker (2011) who document how "Despite over a century of critique . . ." objectivist teaching still remains at the core of how historical survey courses are most often taught (p. 1061) and the accounts of those like Donahue (2002) who shares how she and her colleagues built an effective writing program with broad faculty and institutional support (i.e. they "succeeded" at reform) only to have the program "strangely" resisted years later by faculty and others on their campus (p. 34). We have to consider the real possibility that we may not be able to win this struggle at the local, national, or international level, in the short or long term.

4. Can we do meaningful work in teaching and learning without reform?

If it turns out that broad and deep reforms in higher education are not probable or possible at this time in history, can we at least bring about some of the "considerable promises" of "constructivism and its allied methods" (Potter, 2013, p. 9)? Of course we can still do *something* worthwhile, even while teaching in the shadow of a dead god. The literature abounds with testimonies that confirm this (e.g. Rose, 1990; hooks, 2003; Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Freire, 2000). And we have our own experiences to draw from. Most of us who teach do so because we experienced as students powerful and effective teaching and learning that took place in spite of the institutional structures.

5. *Weighing the obstacles against the possibilities, does it make sense to spend one's life teaching and working for reform?*

Of all the things that one might spend one's life doing to make the world a better place, are teaching and advocacy in higher education likely to be worth the investment—or should we go work at soup kitchens instead? Of the questions I've raised here, this is probably the most difficult and the most important. Research cannot answer it. Individual teachers must, hopefully with the support of a community of people who understand both the objectives and obstacles. I would also add that this question carries particular significance for teachers who, like me, are still early in their careers. To put it quite plainly, Potter's article has me pondering *the size of the task of higher education reform* in the context of *the limits of the one life that I have to live and give*. Like many teachers, young and old, I want to contribute positively to this world. I want to do the most good that I can with what I have, which is my life. So this is a very important question indeed. Will teaching and working for reform be worth it? For many, including myself, I think that the answer will be "yes." But this question and the others I've raised still need to be asked honestly.

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